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PARENTAL NEGATIVE REACTION TO CURRENT METHODS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING--ENCOUNTER AND ALTERNATIVE.

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PARENTS' OBJECTIONS TO AUDIOLINGUAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING CAN BE OFFSET BY--(1) INITIAL COMMUNITY DISCUSSION OF THE LANGUAGE TO BE TAUGHT, (2) A PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAM PROVIDING INFORMATION ABOUT GOALS AND ENCOURAGING PARENTAL INTEREST IN SCHOOL AND LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES, (3) CAREFUL SELECTION OF TEACHERS WITH SUFFICIENT LANGUAGE TRAINING, AND (4) PROVISION FOR ADEQUATE, EFFICIENT EQUIPMENT. THE KEY TO THE SUCCESS OF ANY PROGRAM DEPENDS ULTIMATELY, HOWEVER, UPON THE ENTHUSIASM AND SKILL OF THE TEACHERS. (GJ)

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PARENTAL NEGATIVE REACTION TO CURRENT METHODS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: ENCOUNTER AND ALTERNATIVE

by

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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I. INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE AND METHOD

During the past years there has developed a focusing from the general question: "Should languages be taught?" to a more specific concern with how languages should be taught. In this relation certain controversies have arisen among the lay public and have come to the fore at the classroom level, the child's language learning capacity being the battlefield and the teacher being considered the method incarnate. In view of this, it behooves teachers to analyze the types of negative criticism of their programs that may arise, from what they spring and how they may be dealt with. It is to these general areas, then, that this writer directs her efforts.

Specifically, attention will be paid to the evolving place of foreign language education in the United States, to the varied comments of parents in relation to current methods, to suggested program for meeting these queries. An appendix of materials hopefully usuable by the classroom teacher in such a program is included.

II. THE GENERAL ISSUE: CONTRIBUTING FACTORS AND THEIR RESULTS

The cultural roots of school curriculum include the subject matter, objectives in teaching it, determination of educational activities and their consequent evaluation; this fabric of ideas and institution is part of our national heritage. When change occurs on a level of general culture, as it has in these United States, it will be reflected in education; when change occurs quickly and drastically, as has happened, the job in the schools is commensurately greater.

Science and technology influence culture; every invention divides the labor force, resulting in extreme specialization in training including that requiring language training. There have been changes in community life; the cherished value system of the close knit family has been abandoned leaving the individual unable to appreciate fully value differences among cultures. Social stratification and its converse, mobility, have demanded middle-class education for all.

In short, during a period of cultural transformation, such as our nation is now experiencing, curriculum and the teaching profession must expect to experience uncertainty as to the kind of educational program to build, although eventually the cultural elements, new and old, will be mutually adjusted and a new cultural synthesis achieved.

Secondly, in a time of culture flux, individuals' value systems may be expected to be highly diverse: Those who cling to the old and those who advance the new prematurely, each espousing his point of view with intensity. This makes for a particularly difficult situation in a culture in which political control is wielded by the citizenry. The idea that the schools in the United States are primarily responsible to the people of the community has, to date, maintained a very firm basis in United States democracy.

Another peculiarly American value adding to the milieu of education is the high regard placed on youth. We live in largely a child-centered culture; the caption "Youth -- the Hope of America" is significant; Americans consider very seriously their role as parent-providers and protectors, to the point of freely criticizing any cultural institution for their children's personal lacks.

Fourthly, innovation holds great value to Americans. The old is cast off with alacrity; the new often embraced in faith without proof. The bulk of the world's population reveres the traditional, the old; in the United States prestige often diminishes with age. Educational programs are no exception. To dare to innovate is a blessing in our schools; to dare to detain can spell a disastrous example of cultural lag; to dare to retain that which is valuable is wisdom.

In application, then, to the teaching of foreign language, it is to be expected by all teachers that they will contact the following areas in their relationships with parents:

(1) a divergence of aims and goals for the language program. Many parents will have studied languages only traditionally. To put the new generation into learning situations that are drastically different generates fear for the young. (Language teachers would do well to compare their situation with that of teachers of Modern Mathematics; there are gross similarities.)

(2) a divergence of methodology considered appropriate to language learning. Since methods are directly related to aims, this should be considered an inevitable corollary.

(3) that these divergencies will more often take the form of conflict rather than being complementary.

III. CATEGORIZATION OF PARENT REACTION TO FUNDAMENTAL SKILLS METHOD OF LANGUAGE TEACHING"

Most parental reaction to any program is most likely to be heard during the initial stages of his contact with it. This may be: (1) at a time when the program is being instituted in the community itself; (2) when as a parent he anticipates his child's being involved in an already established program, or (3) during the initial weeks of the child's involvement in a program. There may also be reaction (4) when he considers his personal long-term goals for his child's education. Concerns might be categorized in the following manner:

A. Anticipatory Reactions (see (1) and (2) above),
B. Early-Stage Reactions,
C. Reactions in re Educational Projections.

The following lists have been developed as a result of conversations with school personnel, primarily administrators, teachers, and with several other persons whose positions put them into contact with a number of school systems, whom parents have approached in this regard.

A. Anticipatory Reactions

1. "Who can and should be taught languages with the audio-lingual method?" "What are the criteria for selection if this is done?"

Many communities, in the absence of prognostic devices, allow any enrollee of a given grade level to attempt the initial course offering, putting it on the basis of an elective subject, and reserving the right to request that the child withdraw if he is not judged to be successful.

2. "Is a laboratory essential to current language teaching?"
Some questioning reflects an inquiry regarding method; in other cases it may suggest:
(a) the presence of a laboratory is a glittering prestige symbol,
(b) good teachers are not in need of mechanical gimmicks.

3. "Johnny never wanted to take French. Why don't you offer German?"
Although there are good reasons for selection of a particular language, parents who pose this question often do so out of inference that the child will study only one language throughout his entire school career.

B. Early-Stage Reactions

1. About the textbooks:

a. "Where are they?"
Some courses are taught without issued texts; in others text material is amassed gradually; in most the weeks or months of the pre-reading stage are bookless.

b. "Where is the homework page?"
Parents are accustomed to emphasis on written preparations for secondary school students in other subject areas as well as in language according to their memories.

c. "The books don't look right; the stories are much too difficult; where are the exercises?"
Truly audio-lingual texts do present quite a different appearance from the traditional text.

2. About translation as a source of meaning:

a. "Why don't they translate?"

b. "He doesn't know what he's saying."
When the point of reference is no longer the mother tongue there is presumed to be a vacuum of meaning.

c. "When I ask him to tell me how to say something in Spanish, he can't."
Parents frequently have no knowledge that the child has been taught to respond to a visual, not a verbal stumulus.

3. About grammar:
"Where are the grammar rules?"
Inductive presentation is out-of-order to a parent accustomed to deductive arrangement in grammar presentation.

4. About vocab ulary:
"Why no handy vocabulary lists with their English meanings right at the beginning of a chapter so they know what the words mean?"
Words taught in context and by means other than presenting English near-meanings are fairly unique to audio-lingual texts.

5. About writing:

a. "Why don't they write more?"
In an overly-literate society it is easy to come to think of language as a system of little black marks on paper, rather than as primarily speech communication.

b. "Why are teachers so demanding of perfection when students write in a foreign language, including spelling and accent marks?"
Frequently parents do not realize that students are asked to write only that which has been completely mastered in other ways.

6. About testing:
"How do teachers test what the students know?"
Realizing the relative paucity of written work, and the inherent difficulty in evaluating oral production, parents and students often feel much of their grade is supplied subjectively by the teacher.

7. About home support:
"What can we do to help?" often followed by "I never had that language."
Many of the above parental reactions are motivated by this strong desire to help their children to achieve. In view of curriculum changes parents feel a helplessness that is only augmented by frustration and resentment when they are told that their help would be only a hindrance to classroom learning.

8. About the teacher:
"How qualified is he?"
This is asked presumablyeither out of interest in the teacher's literary background, out of concern for his proficiency in current methodology, or unhappily, out of frustration over a child's poor achievement.

G. Reactions re. Educational Projections

1. About speech facility:
"Will he ever really be able to communicate with natives?"
Often parents with years of study in a language found, very sadly, that they were unable to speak when faced with a need for performance in oral skills. They voice a basic doubt that American schoolrooms can provide a speech-communicative product.

2. About articulation:
a. "Can this approach enable him to continue study in and of the language?"
This asks whether the audio-lingual method is emphasizing a frill and if, truly, speech can possibly be as real an expression of thought as can be written symbols.

b. "How does this initial approach tie in with techniques used in later courses in high school and college?"
Sometimes from experience in later educational years, older students have reported that after the initial emphasis, literature courses reverted to discussions in English that happened to be written in the original in French.

c. "Will these courses satisfy college entrance requirements?"
Parents cannot help but ask this as competition for a place in higher education becomes a greater problem yearly, as entrance requirements increasingly include more thorough language background, and as they have doubt about the value of the audio-lingual approach to literary study.

d. "Will this method help him to achieve well on a college language placement examination?" or, depending upon the system used for placement by the considered college, "How will these credits equate with college credits for advanced placement?"
Many adults know placement tests to include massive vocabulary and reading and translation sections. They also know that the old rule of two years of high school study equating for one of college is subject to much current change.

In summary then, parents' concerns might be said to be born of:
1) doubt and fear of change
2) sincere care for the child
3) simple lack of information
4) unadulterated interest in curriculum.

All of their concerns are actual and cannot be ignored. Oftentimes they are veiled by a dignified disguise. Many of them appear; when a child is not doing well academically; the teacher and "the method" become favorite causes for blame. As in many cases, in each of the above, there may be a genuine element of truth, a facet that would raise doubt and even embarrassment in the thinking of the most objective person, teacher or lay. In a word, these criticisms are heard and must be met. It remains to discover how.

IV. CONFRONTATION OF PARENT REACTION TO FUNDAMENTAL SKILLS METHOD OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

It is well-worn adage, but true, to say that the best defense is a good offense. Informing school patrons of curricular change is not to be done in condescension, nor for school security, nor even for courtesy's sake: It is the obligation of school personnel to use every means available to educate the taxpayers and to respond to intelligent concern. For this role of public relations informant, the following procedures and methods are suggested:

A. In Instituting a Program:

1. The language to be taught must be identified with the help of the populace; the administration cannot afford to guess the will of the people. If the language is an unpopular one in the community severe criticism of the teaching of foreign languages in general is to be expected.

2. The program must be given a prestigious presentation to the people by a resource person from outside the immediate school system who is simultaneously knowledgeable and enthusiastic and who can anticipate future parents' questions and answer them in advance in this initial presentation of ideas.

B. In Programming New Students:

The aims and objectives of the foreign language program must be made abundantly clear to parents. The following are specifics, a combination of some several considered good coverage to allay early-stage and later queries:

1. plain-talk flier explaining aims and methods
2. explanatory films for parent-group viewing
3. published pamphlets bought through PTA program
4. demonstration class as part of the PTA program
5. informative letters to parents after one month explaining goals achieved to date
6. intelligent use of Open House opportunity
7. sincerel invitations to classroom visitation
8. community participation of language interest groups
9. proven checklists for judging
   a. child's progress in the language
   b. home endeavors to be of assistance
   c. selected college's language program

C. In Teacher Selection and In-Service Training:
1. careful scrutinization of teacher credentials prior to employment
2. general use of Modern Lnaguage Association materials including:
   a. Chart for Qualifications for Secondary School Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages, and,
   b. Proficiency Test for Teachers
3. growing use of personal interview in foreign language as part of recommendation for hiring
4. concerned urging of teacher participation in NDEA institutes and other workshop-type program.

D. In Equipment Provisions:
1. efficient and attractive selection of laboratory and other equipment
2. knowledgeable guidance in spending NDEA matching funds
3. reasonable allowance of adequate physical plant apportionment of budget.

V. CONCLUSION

Administrators generally agree that the key to successful foreign language teaching and its acceptance by the community is teachers who are both aggressive and outstanding. To students and parents alike, the classroom teacher is equated with the subject he teaches and "The Method" is interpreted by teacher delivery. The most chrome-plated mechanism can be ruined for public relations by an unwise or unskilled pedant. In the last analysis it is the teacher's performance that will determine the relative success of the foreign language program. This implies a flexible and current person, capable of judgment, ready to listen to better ways of teaching and willing to incorporate such into his course planning and presentation.

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